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Historians look at how women shaped the American West

By Carrie Moore *8 Mar 1986*
Deseret News staff writer

Before the true history of the American West can be accurately understood, students must be taught to think of the period in terms of how it affected both women and men.

That widened perspective is the theme of a conference that will continue through Saturday at the University of Utah. Titled "Women in the West: Discovering Our Past, Creating our Future," the agenda includes lectures on several topics relating women to the development of the West.

"If you can get students to a point where it becomes second nature to see gender as a key division in history and to question the difference in how both men and women were involved, that's when you start to get a realistic picture," says William Cronon, a history department MacArthur Fellow at Yale University.

Cronon and Patricia Nelson Limerick of the University of Colorado history department opened the conference Thursday by discussing

how educators can escape the myths that surround Western history and teach what actually happened.

Cronon said he teaches the actual history of the West by subtly expanding and enriching the stereotypical image of the West that John Wayne movies and Zane Grey novels have created.

"They (the myths) are one of the real virtues of Western history courses in one sense — students come in with a great amount of affection for them. So if you can enrich and expand them, and do it in the right way, (students) acknowledge that those myths are part of themselves and it makes Western history live in a way no other type of history does."

But teaching such expanded courses isn't commonplace. In fact, neither Cronon or Limerick use a text because none at present give a broad picture of the West, including the part that women and minorities played.

Cronon uses an 800-page photocopied collection of documents — written by Western settlers that describe the details of their lives — as the textbook for his students. "And because

at least 40 percent of those authors were women, who didn't necessarily write about women but saw things in a different light, it gives a broader perspective."

Limerick says she is writing her own Western history text that incorporates minorities as well as women and interrelates the roles they play. Until the book is completed, she uses material that will become part of the book to teach her classes.

Rewriting text material for such an all-encompassing subject has been difficult, Limerick says, because "I think Western American history suffers from stereotyping in such a rigid way, much more than other areas that don't have the pressure that John Wayne and Clint Eastwood have put on us. In most of my discussions, I spend more time dismantling the stereotypes than getting to the substance of what is really there."

She says her book will definitely include the role that Hispanics, Orientals and other ethnic groups had in Western history because "the noble, white female pioneer stereotypes put

me off just as much as the noble white males ones did."

Limerick says the Western history most people relate to today resulted from a 19th-century thesis by the father of the field, Frederick Jackson Turner, who said that people moving into the American frontier went back to an earlier stage in civilization, and by doing so, resisted the bureaucracy and aristocracy that prevailed in the East.

That notion fueled the myths that abound today, says Cronon, "that from the energy and perseverance of the settlers came American democracy."

Both historians agreed that Utah history, perhaps more than any other in the West, includes both male and female images. "You can't tell the story of the Mormons if you exclude women," says Limerick. "How would you record things like polygamy and the suffrage movement if you didn't include them."

Linda Sillitoe, a local journalist and former staff writer for the Deseret News, agrees with that assessment and says the prevailing pioneer woman stereotype is perpetuated and en-

larged by many modern Mormon women.

During an afternoon lecture titled "The Myth of the Pioneer Mother," she outlined the stereotypical pioneer woman as one always cheerful and humble in the face of adversity, putting domestic skills, raising a large family and self-sacrifice at the top of her agenda while still finding time to become a doctor, educator or suffragist.

The stereotype has made Mormon women "feel that we could have it all and do it all," Sillitoe said. "Once the West was finally settled, women honored her by honoring the traditional bounds set out for them," while constantly expecting more of themselves.

"As a result, we've accepted major church positions just days after giving birth, filled our suburban split-level homes with home-baked bread, with an extra loaf for the neighbors, and developed every imaginable sort of cottage industry, combining income with physical mothering."

"It's the stereotype or archetype of pioneer women that goads and haunts us. And archetypes can empower, or they can immobilize."

Author will discuss cures for fear, disbelief

Lectures by Charles Capps, an acclaimed author, teacher and radio personality, will be seen locally on projection television in the Full Armor Bible Center, 2820 S. Main, at 5 p.m. Sunday and 6 p.m. Monday and Tuesday.

Capps, a former farmer from England, will be teaching live via satellite from the Word of Faith World Outreach Center in Dallas, Texas, on the subject "The Cure for Fear, Doubt and Unbelief."

The lectures are free.

Christian Science lecturer to speak Sunday

Robert Gates, a Christian Science lecturer from Marblehead, Mass., will speak on "To Know God Is to Trust Him" at 3 p.m. Sunday in First Church of Christ, Scientist, 352 E. Third South.

Gates has devoted many years to

Christian healing ministry as a Christian Science practitioner following a career as a sports editor for the Christian Science Monitor.

The lecture is free and child care is provided.

'Articles of Reformation' will be explained

James Muir will give three lectures in the Salt Lake City Library about his "Articles of Reformation" concerning The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Lectures will be April 3 from 11 a.m. to noon and noon to 1 p.m., and April 4 from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. They are free to the public.



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